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Distance Education: Sizing the opportunity

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DISTANCE EDUCATION

Sizing the Opportunity

Michael Simonson
Co-Editor

Distance educators are often asked about the quality and extent of online education in the United States. Many, especially new students, want to know if instruction delivered at a distance is of high quality, and if distance education is a passing fad, or a viable approach to teaching and learning. The Sloan Consortium, a collection of “institutions and organizations committed to quality online education,” has recently attempted to answer these questions with *Sizing the Opportunity: The Quality and Extent of Online Education in the United States, 2002 and 2003*. The report contains a wealth of information about the field of distance education in general, and about online instruction more specifically (<http://www.sloan-c.org/resources/>).

The study’s authors used a survey to obtain information related to four fundamental questions:

1. Will students embrace online education as a delivery method?
2. Will institutions embrace online education as a delivery method?
3. Will faculty embrace online education as a delivery method?

4. Will the quality of online education match that of face-to-face instruction?

Almost 1000 surveys (about 33% of those sent) were returned from chief academic officers from accredited degree-granting institutions of higher education in the United States. The report is interesting reading and the results are important, if not surprising, to those in the field.

- The majority of chief academic officers believe that the learning outcomes in online courses will equal or exceed that of face-to-face courses within three years.
- An overall growth rate for enrollments in online courses is expected to be 20%.
- For-profit institutions expect a growth rate that is faster than that of other institutions (40%).
- Private, non-profit institutions expect to use online education less than other institutions.
- Given an option, students will enroll in online courses.

- Overall, attitudes of faculty remain conservative about the quality of online education.

Other interesting results show that over 90% of public universities offer online courses, and about half offer degree programs online. About 85% of public universities consider online education critical to their long-term academic strategies, as compared to about fifty percent for private institutions. Fac-

ulty at public universities are more accepting of the value of online education than their colleagues at private universities, and public universities enrolled over 1.3 million students in online courses.

This study is important because it authenticates the amazing growth of distance education, yet it also identifies the very important issues that still confront the field if distance education is to continue to grow in importance.